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## Colouring the claim: visual code and national allegiance in *120 battements par minute* (Robin Campillo, 2017)

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### ABSTRACT

The visual language of *120 Battements par minute* imposes a disciplined approach to colour: specifically, the Tricolore. Blue, white, and red appear in a colour 'chord' that indexes the French flag. This chromatic iconography enables the film to assimilate minoritarian discourses into a French Republican narrative, staking a claim on the French nation on behalf of Act Up-Paris. By placing the national colours strategically within the *mise-en-scène*, Campillo's film uses the Tricolore to help the audience integrate the characters and plot out of their organizational, medico-sexual, and ethnic specificities and back into the prevailing and exclusionary Republican ideology. Although *120 BPM* aligns itself strongly and explicitly with various sexual minority and PWA communities, I argue that its cultural and commercial contexts require it to side-step possible charges of *communautarisme*. Faced with the risk of telling the story of an exotic, possibly foreign-inspired movement, the film *tells* its story through a minoritarian plot and dialogue, while *showing* it to be patriotically French, through colour. Thus does *120 BPM* command authority as a National film, while quietly balancing queer visibility with a claim to integration.

### PRÉCIS

Le langage visuel de *120 BPM* impose une approche disciplinée envers la couleur, surtout le drapeau français. Bleu, blanc, rouge font un accord chromatique, ce qui fait inévitablement référence au drapeau tricolore. Une iconographie de couleurs, sans référence aux couleurs humaines, permet au film de s'assimiler, lui et ses discours, à l'idée de la France, au discours républicain français. Ce moyen de signification à travers la mise-en-scène permet au film aussi de revendiquer une part dans la nation en faveur de Act Up-Paris. En fait le film se sert du tricolore pour encourager un public majoritairement hétéro à accepter son contenu au niveau idéologique, opération compliquée, faute de spécificités identitaires, organisationnelles et médico-sexuelles chez les activistes figurés. Bien que *120 BPM* s'aligne carrément au côté des sexualités minoritaires et des séropositifs, nous proposons que ses contextes historiques et commerciaux exigent au film d'éviter toute accusation possible de communautarisme. Le film raconte des dialogues minoritaires, une intrigue minoritaire, alors qu'il arbore un récit affectif patriotique: question de réaliser un équilibre délicat entre la visibilité et l'intégration historique.

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The visual language of *120 Battements par minute*<sup>1</sup> imposes a disciplined approach to colour: specifically, the *Tricolore*.<sup>2</sup> Blue, white, and red appear in a colour 'chord' that indexes the French flag. This chromatic iconography, comparable with but distinct from that of Krzysztof Kieślowski, enables the film to assimilate minoritarian discourses into a French Republican narrative, staking a claim on the French nation on behalf of Act Up-Paris. A race-and-colour-neutral colour scheme, it helps this ensemble film avoid the pitfall of over-privileging a single person or set of types. It also reins in the iconographic power of settings and activities, such as Paris or the dance floor. It even helps the film to downplay the now-discredited theory, current at the time but discarded since, that HIV might not have been instrumental in causing AIDS. Thus does *120 BPM* command authority, as a National film, quietly living up to mainstream political expectations among important sections of its audience.

My reading of *120 BPM*'s *mise-en-scène* of the French national colours balances colour theory and criticism with a historical and aesthetic awareness of AIDS cinema and queer cinema in general, largely but not exclusively in France. Of key interest is the positioning of AIDS activism, as exemplified onscreen by Act Up, within established discourses of the French polity. Although *120 BPM* aligns itself strongly and explicitly with various sexual minority and PWA communities, I argue that its cultural and commercial contexts require it to pass, politically, in order to sidestep possible charges of *communautarisme*.<sup>3</sup> The strategy would be primarily defensive, designed to minimize rejection by the wider audience. Some of this sensitivity derives from the potentially uncomfortable dynamic of Act Up-Paris having been a French socio-political pressure group, within the setting and frameworks of the French state, yet operating on a model designed and tested in the USA. Faced with the risk of telling the story of an exotic, possibly foreign-inspired movement, the film *tells* its story through a minoritarian plot and dialogue, while *showing* it to be patriotically French, through colour.

A full discussion of these topics should account at least for the following factors: the iconography of the Tricolore in its national political context; the cinematic iconography of both its component colours and their combination in-and-as the flag; and the ways in which *120 BPM* responds, and perhaps contributes, to the role and stakes of the French nation vis-à-vis minority sexuality discourse, by using and interacting with that flag. I shall treat all three aspects, the fulcrum being the iconography of these national colours and *120 BPM*'s engagement with them.

## Le Tricolore

The French revolutionary Tricolore flag is a cornerstone of popular vexillology. Uniting the traditional colours of Paris (red and blue) with that of France (white), it was adopted in its current form on 15 February 1794. The flag is defined as the national emblem under Article 2 of the Constitution of 1958, and was popular even during periods of disuse in 1814–1830 and (briefly) in 1848. Long celebrated in left-leaning circles, internationally as well as in France, as a symbol of popular idealism,<sup>4</sup> it has featured heavily in modern official iconography under governments of all stripes, including during Pétain's Vichy-era 'Révolution Nationale'. It is hard to imagine a stronger political icon,<sup>5</sup> never mind the flag's appeal as a relatively simple, eye-catching design.

French popular culture reinforces the Tricolore so regularly that its status as an icon seems hardly to need justifying. Within this ubiquity, however, there are certain long-standing mass-market uses of it that tend to introduce the blue and white, visually, slightly before and differently from the red, so that the red forms a counterpoint of sorts to a cool sub-theme. For instance, the tailplanes of the Air France fleet use a broad blue band, followed by ever-thinner blue bands and soon lines, followed by a medium broad red band. The home strip for the French national football team is a blue shirt, white shorts, and red socks, such that the blue and white constitute the field (on the wearer) and the red, the movement. This is a visual strategy rather than an ideological one, using the red as a 'kicker' (especially for *Les Bleus!*), although one could imagine it taking on ideological functions.

Classical colour theory has long incorporated the idea that colour combinations can be expected to follow relational patterns. That master of Romantic nationalist tableaux, Eugène Delacroix, had proposed a basic ternary relationship within colours as they are encountered in everyday life. The paradigm would be the base colour, the shine, and the shadow. Delacroix saw this in the example of hung laundry: white, with a violet shadow and a green reflection. 'De même qu'une plume est un composé de petites plumes [...] est le luisant des objets; de même c'est dans ces sortes d'objets que j'ai le plus remarqué la présence des trois tons réunis: une cuirasse, un diamant, etc. [...] ... enfin, j'en suis venu à convaincre que rien n'existe sans ses trois tons' (Delacroix 1854, 223). Following this logic, if any colour can be expected to have a tripartite composition, it becomes an easy analogy to propose that three colours might together betoken a single reality, or that ternary relationships among colours might conform to, or even be pitched towards, a conventionally understandable paradigm.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Delacroix's perception of harmonic colours *within* colour complements the longstanding expectation that colours will combine, will match, and that close approaches to main colours can reinforce them, if shown together strategically. One of his masterpieces is of course the superb *La Liberté guidant le peuple* (1830), whose brick-toned masses, dense clouds of smoke, steely sky, and even a dead man's navy sock all but sing to the Tricolore (Feisner 2006, 141), which Marianne brandishes in pride of place.<sup>7</sup>

In the contemporary French political register, the Delacroix-Liberty-Marianne trope is so familiar that it constitutes an unstated referent or *hors texte*' (Kidd 2005, 200). Prolific contributors include Manet, Monet, Boudin and dozens of others (see Serri 2016, 44–47, 49–51, 54–55). Fernand Léger topicalizes the Tricolore in his *Le 14 juillet*, painted shortly before his mobilization in 1914. The work is a Cubist tour de force, but also a patriotic one. In cinema, Richard Misek has traced several high-profile examples, from Abel Gance's *Napoléon* (1927) to Jean-Luc Godard's consistent use of primaries across several films, which Misek characterizes as a brand strategy (2010, 56–57; see also 24), but also as a discourse so clearly nationalistic that Godard later modified it to send a more revolutionary formal message (Misek 2010, 186 n. 8).

André Verdet says that Léger's formal experimentation enables the colours in *14 juillet* to transcend, even to escape their indexical meanings (Verdet 1969, 14). This reading is debatable, given the context of Léger's willing mobilization for the First World War. However, in functional terms, it does closely resemble Misek's reading of Godard. Were one to entertain it, one could then propose that the sheer challenge of *de-nationalizing*

the Tricolore's colours is stiff enough for it to have attracted successive generations of the avant-garde, in different media. I propose that Campillo recognized this challenge, and responded to it a bit differently

## Cinematic colour criticism and the Tricolore

Before describing the process and instances of Campillo's national chromo-recuperation in detail, I must briefly explain the theory and method of chromo-hermeneutics in film. Part of this step involves explaining how the known, and quite restrictive iconography of the Tricolore interacts with the formal and conceptual freedom inherent to cinematic colour.

'Colour is less a reality than a perception' (Everett 2009, 350). Comparably, in many filmic situations, colour is the vehicle *par excellence* for affect, to the point where several critics equate the two (Everett 2007, 115; see also Mamoulian in Wulff 1990, 183). For these reasons a straightforward 'decoding' of colour is impossible: any hermeneutics of colour must necessarily be contextual (Peacock 2010, 3, 109; Coates 2010, 17). 'Colour is universal, and colours are contingent' (Batchelor 2000, 94). 'Il n'y a pas de loi absolue de signification de couleurs, ni de correspondances entre sons et couleurs, ni de l'action des couleurs en général. Il faut construire le système de l'œuvre, en tenant compte des « conceptions généralement admises »' (Aumont 1994, 174). Drawing on the work of Mamoulian, Kracauer, and others, Hans Wulff says that filmic colour should not be taken as an appearance of iconic representation, but rather as an element of the film's signification apparatus (1990, 192). 'Colours are *filmic material*. They belong to the filmic *realm of expression*' (*ibid.*, original italics).

It is well-accepted that colour can be a handy device for exploring space and time (Everett 2007, 120). Marion Poirson-Dechonne suggests a powerful model of colour interplay in the context of the historical film, noting particularly the role of the audience: '... la couleur des films peut trahir l'idéologie d'une époque, en matière d'une couleur ... Les films historiques n'échappent pas à cette tendance: ils reflètent la manière dont l'époque où ils ont été tournés voyait l'histoire, et lui conférait les couleurs' (Poirson-Dechonne 2009, 84). She refines the question in asking, implicitly, whether the backwards-looking, historicizing aspect to a given colour scheme might be confirming an audience's expectation, or producing one. In her analysis Poirson-Dechonne tends towards the latter option. Having reflected on the yellow filter used heavily in *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* (2004) to create 'sa tonalité particulière, son climat', she concludes that 'le cinéma sert, d'une certaine façon, à modéliser les représentations historiques' (82).

Of course, the approach Poirson-Dechonne describes could never be said to operate in a cultural vacuum. Aumont's cautious formula, 'conceptions généralement admises', points to the fact that most colours do, after all, have a number of conventional meanings that might be 'chosen' from. Building a chromatic semiotics is a constructive exercise to a degree, but it also involves reckoning with the audience's acculturated expectations. When discussing Kieślowski's *Trois Couleurs: Bleu* (1993), Steven Woodward says that whereas the *Trois Couleurs* trilogy's publicity relates each featured colour to the Tricolore, the director and his co-writer Krzysztof Piesiewicz have claimed that 'they mistakenly assumed (or perhaps coyly and wilfully miscomprehended) that these three colours were closely linked to the French republic's political ideals of liberty, equality, and

fraternity' (Woodward 2017, 59). Woodward identifies both vexillological and ideological readings as pretexts. Kieślowski chose to balance elements of conventional Western affective symbolism (blue = despair, white = detachment, red = engagement) with highly innovative chromatic narrative. In doing so he would, throughout the trilogy but particularly in *Bleu*, 'invite us to be attuned to colour's narrative and expressive potential, and yet in each film work to maintain a plausible, indexical function for his three colours, so that his audience will not become disaffected, his colours will maintain their living "prismatic nature" ' (Woodward 2017, 68). Extradiegetic knowledge, namely the colours' conventional meanings, might well allow the audience to recuperate partially what might otherwise seem to them to be the displaced, 'misplaced' colour. At the same time, another extradiegetic aspect, indexicality to the Tricolore and the national discourses of which it is an icon, powers the trilogy's marketing. One might return to Jeunet to note in counterpoint that, in *Un long dimanche de fiançailles*, the Tricolore is little to be seen. That film offers many alternative models and sites of Frenchness, as well as bold colour experiments, but seemingly shies away from engaging with that intense, perhaps overladen, iconic container of both.

*Trois Couleurs* is of course celebrated, its teasing, pretextual indexicality to the Tricolore much-discussed, making it an inevitable landmark in the chromo-thematics of French film. *120 BPM* all but quotes *Bleu* in the extended hospital sequence, whose setting strongly recalls that of Julie's near attempt (in *Bleu*) at suicide; never mind *120 BPM*'s arresting reddening of the Seine later on (both scenes to be discussed presently). And yet, Campillo's challenge is a metathesis of Kieślowski's. For *Trois Couleurs*, the audience's potential disaffection would concern the colours' not-belonging to the flag. Multiply displaced, each colour might fall victim to new metonymies with all sorts of 'inappropriate' affective charges. For *120 BPM*, the problem lies not within the formal semiotics, but within the subject matter. Cristina Johnston notes that, while gay film has long been acquiring a mainstream audience in France (2010, 131–2), the republic was always already heterosexual (142). 'The republic's citizen is not a blank, universalizable canvas in the traditional sense, but rather the concept of citizenship contains, implicit within it, pre-conceptions of sexuality, just as it contains an implicit notion of gender and ethnicity' (*ibid.*, 171). The challenge is not to the colours' existing semiotic content, but rather to the film's and its characters' debatable belonging to and within it. The same extradiegetic knowledge within the audience is at stake, in both works' cases. However, in *120 BPM*, colour works as a covert marketing device by *enacting* a strategic and recuperative displacement, bringing the topic and characters back 'into France', rather than potentially falling victim to an alienating one, as with Kieślowski.

To recall Poirson-Dechonne, Campillo's task is to capture the tonal climate of a period well within living memory, hence subject to demanding standards of verisimilitude, with the added challenge of modelling the history of a movement facing charges, sometimes, of *communautarisme* (see Martel in Johnston 2010, 404). I would argue that Campillo, faced with these challenges, responds with a strategy justified by Kristeva's observation that colour breaks free of the narrative because of being necessarily *in relation* to it, on account of its iconic origins (Kristeva 1972, 388). The ordinary implication would be that the narrative broken free from is that of the work. In this specific example, I propose (again, after Poirson-Dechonne), it is in fact the audience's internal historical narrative, a hitherto exclusive master narrative, that the film could be displacing, remodelling, or

both. By placing the national colours strategically within the *mise-en-scène*, Campillo's film uses the Tricolore to integrate the characters and plot *out* of their organizational and medico-sexual specificities, *out* of their personal history even, and back into the prevailing and hitherto exclusive Republican ideology.

I echo Emma Wilson's formula, 'personal history', to call attention to her concept of identity formation through cinema (1999, 19–20). In the case of *120 BPM*, the identity being formed is not that of the characters, but rather that of the audience, whose Republican allegiance becomes a vehicle for that identity's being made more inclusive. A potentially over-personal, minority history becomes a national one.<sup>8</sup>

## Bleu, blanc, rouge rouge rouge

*120 BPM's* *mise en œuvre* of the national colours broadly resembles those of Air France and Les Bleus. Blue and white appear together, sometimes slightly tinted or subdued, with red used as a dramatic and final counterpoint. There is relatively little red in most of the film, meaning that when it does appear it stands out all the more. In only one sequence, the nightmare of the 'bloody Seine', does red appear immediately with blue. In all other cases in which it features prominently, the two colours along with white are discrete, sometimes with intervening fields of greys.<sup>9</sup> When all three coincide, however rarely, the effect approaches a classic 'colour-on-itself' contrast, where bright, monochromatic zones of at least three ground colours appear next to one another, broken up only with equally simple zones of white and/or black (Marschall 2005, 96).

The colour strategy arises early on, through the protagonists' costuming in blue and white. At minute 8, in a tense montage of mostly matching thigh-high mid-shots where the group are discussing how their last protest may have got out of hand, Sophie (performed by Adèle Haenel) appears in foreground wearing a navy blue anorak over a bright white t-shirt, the dull white walls of the lecture theatre behind her in weaker focus. The match cuts to Max (performed by Félix Maritaud) in a royal blue t-shirt, centre mid-foreground, with the same dull white wall behind but in deep focus. An extra, looking up at him (to stage right) from a lower row, holds a bright white postcard with a blue label towards their face. Already there is a hint of some of Godard's technique: while the lighting is subtler, there are still very few shadows, fields of primary colour do get pride of place when there are any, and the backgrounds are indeed 'canvas-like' (cf. Bergala 1995, 134). In the following flashback to the protest itself, these cool shades are shown up violently by the bloody splattering of a Melton Pharm exec, who had been taken hostage briefly during the event. Red fake blood oozes in slow-motion over and, mostly, past the targeted exec's head. There is a cut to Sophie, wearing the same dark blue jacket as at the meeting, turning to look across stage where the boys, their shoulders sporting the white Act Up logo on black and their faces brilliant under a red wash, are handcuffing the 'bloodied' exec (dressed in black) to some scaffolding. *Qu'un sang impur abreuve nos sillons*: in a classically Butlerian queering, the activists, and the film after them, claim back their life by projecting their 'shed blood' onto an authority figure, returning the hostile interpellation of their own contamination (Butler 1993, 23). Their survival, one imagines, might be fertilized through this symbolic bloodshed, as the hoped-for medicine displaces the future crops of the 'Marseillaise'.



When discussing Jean-Pierre Jeunet, Isabelle Vanderschelden describes his style as 'both high-tech and highly stylized. This characteristic links him to the Cinéma du Look of the 1980s' (2007, 74). Interesting, then, that in the arresting slow-motion blood splatter, Campillo might be drawing on both Jeunet and Jeunet's inspiration. The sophisticated digital effects that propel red, in itself an almost trite attraction (Marschall 2005, 44, 51), to claim centre stage speak for themselves. As for the *Cinéma du Look* stylization, the sequence overall does echo the earliest clear sign of Betty's impending madness in *37°2 le matin* (1986, directed by Jean-Jacques Beineix), when she angrily throws a bucketful of paint all over a fancy car. Both splashes are prolepses (Seán does indeed die, as does Betty), both wanton, both colourful. *120 BPM* might not yet be thematizing the Tricolore as explicitly as, for example, *Une femme est une femme* (1961, directed by Jean-Luc Godard), with Angela (performed by Anna Karina) especially, but it certainly is already drawing on firm antecedents for a colour-driven historical intervention. Indeed, the fact that the red first appears most explicitly in a *flashback* could betoken that memory, specifically political memory, is what is most at stake.

There are many ways in which one might partition *120 BPM*, according to which aspect one wished to highlight. As an attempt at a 'visual parsing' or 'visual chaptering', I might suggest an unequal two-part structure. In the beginning, covering approximately the first fifty minutes, the action focuses principally on meeting scenes. These constitute what I will call the 'main phrase' of the activists' project,<sup>10</sup> their meeting and working together, and the establishment of their backstory, aims, and views as characters. Fittingly, it is also the venue for their constitution as a group: their haggling over, and consensus around, the rules and actions that compose their project. The lecture theatre in which they meet becomes their *salle du jeu de paume*.

I have already discussed the first unit within this early main sequence, in which the first steps to the film's chromo-iconographic strategy arise. The second unit is even more explicit in its establishment of blue and white as keynote colours, grounded through costuming, with relatively clear lighting, neutral backdrops, and mid- and near mid-shots of characters dramatically displaced from centre. Consider for example a sequence encompassing minute 36, during a fun conversation about slogans. Max stands up dramatically in a bright white t-shirt. Hélène (performed by Catherine Vinatier) laughs in an intense blue unbuttoned blouse, a backturned young man's dark hair and shirt creating a visual bar between her and someone else's shoulder and chest, which like her are in sharp focus, midground, but clad in white—so, a blue/white contrast. Sophie is wearing light blue now, and Thibault (performed by Antoine Reinartz) a darker blue shirt jersey-striped in a dull buff: the blue theme, with variations sometimes in complementary contrasts, keeps subtly with the iconic base.

In all, there are three subdivisions of this beginning main sequence of blue and white/with red, the first two of which concluded by a jump cut to a dance floor scene (approx. minute 23 and minute 41 respectively), in which—a departure from the committee scenes—the occasional red pulse punctuates the whites, blues, and also blacks of the characters' costuming. In tandem with the intense, pounding, diegetic music and the characters' moving, sweating bodies, the red pulses communicate conventional senses of energy, passion, etc. They also, however, recall the bloody red protest splash. Although the music and lack of dialogue encourage a lyrical reverie or flight of fancy, it is difficult to abstract the action from the plot entirely, because the



characters' faces are still in clear view. The dance floors are too small, the camera too close, for us to lose them in a uniform field, an anonymous crowd.<sup>11</sup> Following Suzanne Marschall's observation that the colour red commonly functions as an archetypal sign of a disturbing, synergetic affective field (2005, 51), I suggest that the dance betokens the revolutionary 'violence' that the characters need and will bring about. Having seen so much tense planning, we *want* their protests to get messy, the same way we would want to see the Bastille broken open.

The end of *120 BPM*'s first chromatic 'movement', to draw on Wendy Everett's musical analogy,<sup>12</sup> comes with the parade sequence, in which the established venue—the lecture hall—is forsaken for an extended period in an exterior setting.<sup>13</sup> The established colours make way for the green of the trees and, of course, pink—queer pink, denationalized pink, camp and joyous pink. Pink ribbons, pink shorts, pink triangles ensure that even though the sequence unfolds under rather a dull sky, we recognize the event as a standout. It becomes a punctuating bridge between the earlier passages of collective planning and execution, and the later portions of the film, in which Seán and Nathan's personal drama comes to the fore.

Such singularity notwithstanding, even in this parade sequence we can see subtle traces of the blue-white-red triplet. At minute 53, right after a panoramic shot of trees, triangles and pom-poms, we see Sophie firing a confetti cannon while Eva (performed by Aloïse Sauvage), slightly back midground, smokes a cigarette. Sophie's shirt is white, Eva's navy; behind them figures just out of focus wear shadowed white (rumpled) and royal blue t-shirts, while the doors of what might be a university side gate are not red, but certainly a ruddy brown.

What is most noticeable about the parade sequence is how relatively *un-camp* the style actually is, especially considering that Seán and the boys are taking it as their chance to be 'pom pom girls', as he says. The colours are bright, but they are hardly saturated or cartoonish—consider *Gazon maudit* (Josiane Balasko, 1995) or *But I'm a Cheerleader* (Jamie Babbit, 1999) as counterexamples. Indeed, it is the visuals' kinetic element that packs the biggest punch here. Recall that the sequence is shot in slow-motion: we have plenty of time to admire the 'confetti' tableau with the two young women, as well as another wherein Germain (performed by Méhdi Touré) beams at the front of the parade, while above and behind him the black SILENCE = DEATH banner picks up glossy midnight blue tones from the sky, upper left in the visual field, and a bright red-shirted marcher with a blue whistle out of focus in the background (hence, red shirt lower right) holds up a white placard: a possible visual echo of the extra's note card highlighting Max, in the first meeting sequence. The positioning of the colour fields recalls Delacroix, with Germain at the head of this moving barricade, head turned to his right as with Delacroix's model. The film thus positions him as a black, male, gay Marianne.

At the end of *Nés en 68* (2008, directed by Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau), during anti-Sarkozy protests upon his election, we see multiple fleeting but remarkable shots of an anonymous young woman protester on a barricade, waving a red flag, in an obvious Marianne reference. The protester is played by Laëtitia Casta, who of course has spent the entire film playing its protagonist, Catherine, latterly under age-enhancing makeup. Setting aside the event's relevance to Ducastel and Martineau's film's plot, we can view the effort at iconography as being normative, never mind that Casta already had enjoyed a star identity closely associated with Marianne (Kidd 2005, 194). In contrast,

*120 BPM* innovates here by lending the iconic role, as originally staged by Delacroix, to a character who is both minor in the narrative and visibly very different from the stereotype of Marianne as a white woman.

At no point in *120 BPM* is any character's ethnicity topicalized verbally. However, the activists' visible diversity encompasses not only Germain, but also Hélène and her son Marco (performed by Théophile Ray), who form a multi-ethnic family, and Mehdi and Bachir (performed by Mehdi Rahim-Silvioli and Bachir Saïfi), a Maghrebin couple, one of whom uses sign language only. In promoting Germain, briefly, as a Marianne-image, Campillo's film recasts the national ideography as neutral to human colour, inclusive in practice, in a manner likely to appeal to a progressive mainstream white audience.<sup>14</sup>

After the parade sequence, as Seán becomes sicker and tensions with the less-radical (and sexually competitive) Thibault rise within the group, the action shifts firmly towards the lovers, Seán and Nathan (performed by Nahuel Pérez Biscayart and Arnaud Valois respectively), who come together over a narrative and visual red herring: Nathan's backstory. In a fugue-like transitional moment, the parade gives way to another meeting sequence, in which Eva, wearing a bright red jumper left mid-background in weak focus, forms a Tricolore with Thibault, in a navy top and white t-shirt underneath, right mid-ground in sharp focus, against the familiar neutral walls.<sup>15</sup> The colour order is inverted to red-white-blue: perhaps Thibault is a necessary obstacle? Still, we have a new tension developing between the activist, collectivist theme and a personal interlude.

Narrated by Nathan, this interlude (minutes 81–83 approx.) which separates the two main parts of the film, as I read it, unfolds in relatively dull light, accentuating the tanner notes in Nathan's features and the sea green in his patterned top. No bright or pure colours are to be seen. Although we learn from his monologue that his previous lover, Arnaud, sickened and surely died of AIDS, as will happen with Seán, the parallel is only superficial. The tale is fundamentally one of abandonment, with Nathan being cut off from Arnaud and his family: the opposite of what will happen presently with Seán. Here is a story that cannot or perhaps should not be integrated into the situation at hand, and the visuals reflect this.

The first extended nursing scene, however, which follows shortly afterwards (min. 87), returns to the Tricolore, albeit in a more sombre vein. It unfolds under a gruesome reddish light, and includes a tight closeup of Nathan's hand working a white tube cuff and one white and one blue connector cuffs on the IV bag. We cut to a quick club scene, where Nathan is dancing without Seán, under the cobalt light of the disco.<sup>16</sup> We thus see Nathan's current life as two saturation effects: the red/battle? at home for Seán's survival; the blue/loneliness? outside, without him. And, Nathan's situationally competent but contextually hopeless effort—no matter what he does, Seán is dying, and we know it—can be seen in the context of a Tricolore assemblage, the tiny white elements visually 'squeezed' by the competing saturations: imbalanced, because sorely pressed by the emergency.

My interpretation of the wash effects used with Nathan is of course coloured by convention, as influenced by my choice of the mood best fitting the plot in this sequence. And yet, it is interesting that the first main portion of the *Seán Agonistes* sequence, the extended hospital visit that Nathan pays Seán, amplified the chromatic strategy seen from the beginning in the lecture theatre, with blue and white dominating. I have mentioned the similarity between Seán's hospital room and that of *Trois Couleurs: Bleu*; it seems near-

gratuitous that the walls almost perfectly match Seán's eyes, as he devours the television news (min. 97). In a potentially dreary setting, the frank sexuality that the pair enjoy when Nathan masturbates Seán, with happily messy results, both concretizes and hyperbolizes the tense yet ultimately disarming sequences from the lecture hall. The activists might rub each other the wrong way, but they do care for one another and the friction goes off with a bang ...

Importantly, however, this is a personal episode, not a national one. Although not a full-exposure sex scene, as with (for example) the gloriously daylight beach bonk in *Presque rien* (2000, directed by Sébastien Lifshitz), it does feature explicitly sexualized material—a young man's hairy lower torso, with another young man's hairy arm plunged firmly into his pants. This image works in a way comparable to how the full-frontal shots in *Presque rien* work, in Gary Needham's account of that film: both works build on the classical Hollywood closeup, by allowing us to access the characters' interiority, and also sport queer subjectivity, thus mounting 'a challenge to the normativity of film form' (Needham 2009, 136). For this discussion, I would suggest that here, specifically, the visual context and colour scheme of *120 BPM* quietly sidelines the political power of *sexual* queerness, as opposed to *identitarian* queerness, because this episode exists in the shadow—in the nursing scene, the literal shadow—of proleptic appearances of red. The lovers might gigglingly tidy up Seán's semen, but what gives the scene its pathos is his contaminated *blood*, the suffering he undergoes, and ultimately the national disaster that we are soon invited to see in it. Nathan's nightmare vision of the bloodied waves of the Seine confirms this. *120 BPM* is not primarily a romance: it is an epic. The frank assertion of sexuality in spite of illness is life-affirming, but it is also an incident within the film, rather than part of its primary message.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, we can suggest that by this point in the film, without blood, the scene is somehow incomplete. Both plot and iconography have already run past it. Certainly, in terms of general topic it chimes with the message. However, a majority of the audience who gave the film the Grand Prix de Cannes, the Prix François Chalais, numerous Césars and other mainstream prizes, and a first-run profit (over 90% domestic) can only have been straight and French.<sup>18</sup> The appeal of a sexuality that is not shared cannot compare with the appeal of an ideology, a political identity, that is. One object lesson from the ballad of Nathan and Seán is that the personal can, after all, find its place among a more mainstream audience, as an example of a citizens' narrative.

Soon afterwards, we are of course treated to another intrusion, via Nathan's horrible dream, of red, much more explicit both in its scale and weirdness and in its close involvement with blue. Under a leaden sky, framed in low-angle shots incorporating the bridges from L'Île de la Cité as in so many other films,<sup>19</sup> the Seine itself turns red: red blooming, flushing through, under a blue sheen. 'Red is blue screaming' (Jarman in Cloarec 2009, 265). In turning the quintessential French river the colour of blood, Campillo most certainly stages a Jarmanesque chromatic coup. 'La question de la couleur chez Jarman se confond en effet avec deux infinis de la représentation: l'incarnat d'une part, à savoir la chair irriguée de sang ... et le monochrome d'autre part, la pureté chromatique détachée de toute contingence formelle' (Cloarec 2009, 260). Here the river's colour evokes incarnate contaminated blood and the sheer unreality of a red river—*still bound* to its colour counterpart, blue. In all of the mid-shots of the river, from a flâneur's-eye view, the blue sheen is

clearly visible. Only in a far overhead shot, well outside the human perspective, do we see the river head-on as a matte red strip. The message seems to be that on an individual viewer's level, there can still be an affective counter, a conflict, a combination. On a grand scale, there is an emergency; but on the human scale the viewer is interpellated to take this event as a rallying cry—a nationalized rallying cry. And of course, red and blue are the colours of Paris: with the iconic settings, we can interpret that the whole city is under attack. Here again, both appeal and identification are designed to be general.

### Claiming the colours, colouring the claim

The final movement of *120 BPM*, the second portion to the Seán-and-Nathan saga following the arresting 'bloody Seine' sequence, balances Seán's death throes with increasingly desperate and tragic but also larger, better-attended demonstrations by Act Up. In terms of iconography and colour, these sequences do not, primarily, employ the Tricolore. In fact their visual inspiration seems to derive from both before and after Romanticism. The activists sprawled out in a die-in, shot dramatically from overhead (minute 108), invoke such later Modern works as Jackson Pollock's *Alchemy* (1947): an energetic yet highly abstracted expression of inner natural force (Langhorne 2012, 120).<sup>20</sup> Seán, on the other hand, when being carried home to die by the SAMU, evokes such familiar pictures of aestheticized, gay-coded suffering as Saint Sebastian,<sup>21</sup> his pose evoking that of the saint in a well-known rendition by Georges de la Tour (ca. 1649), among others.

And yet, there are hints of a surprise finish 'on theme'. Right after the Pollockesque overhead shot, there is a cut to Thibault speaking into the tannoy, his face reddish in medium closeup under the streetlights, with many more soft focus lights, mostly white, behind him. Over a short but static take between 108 min 10 sec and 108 min 13 sec, his head moves ever so slightly, and a red light winks on and then off, just to the right of his face, where a bluish light was before. Thibault is displaced a little to the left, meaning that this winking red light is dead centre in the screen: an unlikely accident, and a *mise-en-scène* of the 'kicker' approach from *Les Bleus*. Whereas a pinpoint red flash propels Thibault's words, a red cloth powers Seán's will: during the penultimate scene, the latest batch of executives, clad in blues, whites and greys, dares to enjoy a banquet atop red tablecloths. The combination begs for our revolutionaries to upend the event, with the 'political funeral' Seán had wished for, and they certainly oblige.

The very last scene of the film shows the survivors, in an even darker club than usual, bopping furiously as ever. The very poor lighting hides their features so well that they can be imagined as Artaud's initiates, sending us more signs than any ego-specific communication.<sup>22</sup> And yet, there is a strong chromatic anchor. Under these conditions, the characters' faces are unusually washed out, whitened; shadows fall as bluish shades. The final image of the film is a brief but arresting flashed static image of Nathan's face, its left half in shadow (bluish) and its right half in light (white), with an intense dot of red seemingly shining through his right ear. If Denis Lavant's desperate, frenetic dance under merciless, multicoloured lights at the end of *Beau Travail* (1999, directed by Claire Denis) is a model to cite, *120 BPM*'s heartbroken fighter is considerably better placed. The scene

leaves him, rather than the other way around.<sup>23</sup> The focus is clearly on his uplifted face, rather than his writhing body; and, of course, instead of military fatigues, he wears the flag.

The personal and the political are now reconciled. Nathan, coloured appropriately, has risen from being a personalized lover to a/nother gay Marianne whose dance bespeaks a group energy. His handsome face, the flag's colours, and possibly also his whiteness make him easily assimilable to the French nation. Through chromo-iconographic mediation, we can understand his and his compatriots' struggles to be r/Revolutionary, fitting a model that has of course created the French state, rather than representing a minority social and sexual tendency that might fragment it. As for the reversal of order (red-white-blue, as the Western viewer reads), it seems almost polite, as if not to insist on the flag parallel.

In a Girardian reading of the film, Rosidin Ali Syabana and Wening Udasmoro propose the protagonists to be cultural scapegoats for France at large: an out-group whose violation of sociosexual norms demands their targeting and exclusion (2019, 108), and whose anarchic behaviour and physical distinction—seropositivity—lead to the same rejection-reaction (*ibid.*, 112). Agreeing wholeheartedly with these points, I would amplify Syabana and Udasmoro's implicit argument concerning the state *per se*. Act Up's 'anarchic' challenge responds to the degree to which heterosexual wellness *forms* the mainstream normative vision of the state itself. Indeed, Act Up-Paris acted against the grain of other contemporary PWA organizations in France by politicizing AIDS and identifying homosexuality with disease (Ernst 23, 28). If we are to view the film in light of concerns over the allegedly 'post-queer' moment, whereby triumphant early-to-mid-noughties hypervisibility later revealed itself to be both problematically white and male, and a more fragile political device than was at first thought (Boyle 2012, 55), we might suggest that *120 BPM* tries to balance visibility with an effort at re-integration of Act Up, and by extension queers, into the *polis*. To respond to Michael Grace's characterization (after José Esteban Muñoz and Sara Ahmed) of nightclub moments in general as 'transient, retreating and even imagined images not severed from history but bound to it, albeit, importantly, in the preservation of the very possibility of a different one' (2021, 10, original emphasis), I suggest that the alternative history wished for by *120 BPM* is perhaps not as radical as it might be, as it insists on queer identification with, and reintegration into, the French republic.

Lastly, I suggest briefly that the subtle, sub-tertiary and organic colours of sequences depicting intercellular activity in *120 BPM* mark these as being a lyric counterpoint to the film's main theme. Affectively, they add dramatic pressure to the narrative by warning us that the virus, too, is making progress. Iconographically, however, they exist in a separate realm from the main plot. The Tricolore is nowhere to be seen, nor does any character wear these subtle cellular or 'viral' colours—with the exception of Nathan, during his monologue, at a time when we know him to be seronegative. The virus must therefore be following a parallel plot.

Importantly, the idea that the HIV virus might not be responsible for causing AIDS is never mentioned in the film—not even during the activists' discussions about causative mechanisms in Thibault's flat. This is most unusual for the time period. In the late 80s and 90s alternative theories were rife, as were discussions about them in PWA and activist communities.<sup>24</sup> To take only one contemporary film example, John Greyson's 1993

comedy musical *Zero Patience*, which is about Patient Zero, features a sequence in which Miss HIV, a drag queen who 'is' the virus, explains to the camera that it is entirely possible she is being framed for causing AIDS—making her a queer scapegoat twice over. In *120 BPM*, however, the virus, through these alternate CGI sequences, is posed as a clear *yet voiceless* reality, paralleling and in opposition to the activists' reality, and coloured accordingly.

By eliding the historical fact of causative controversies over HIV, *120 BPM* might possibly aim to spare the activist community the embarrassment of being seen nowadays as somehow atavistic. Michel Bounan's *Le Temps du SIDA* (1990) and comparable works of HIV causal scepticism were discussed widely in many different language cultures in their day; whereas now, the idea that the virus does not bring about AIDS is a fringe theory. In today's context, showing causal scepticism within the film could become problematic, further dividing the characters and weakening their appeal to an out-group audience to unite with them under the flag. It would also risk complicating Act Up's central strategy, which was to blur the boundaries between gay activism and AIDS activism by politicizing both simultaneously (Ernst 28–29). Insofar as the Tricolore privileges a popular political identity and popular unity, it harmonizes with an 'us-and-it' dynamic of people-against-the-virus. Although anachronistic, simplifying the body of opinion anent HIV enables *120 BPM* to distribute people and virus thematically as well as visually into two discrete tracks. The message is clear: as far as popular vitality is concerned, the virus is a rhythmic punctuation only. It is not integrable, not to be given a platform, and certainly not French.

## Notes

1. Hereafter styled as *120 BPM*.
2. Hereafter styled without italics, but capitalized and untranslated, to distinguish it from other vertical tribands.
3. On the difficulties of minority social movements in dealing with the French state, see for example Claire (Ernst 1997), 26–27.
4. For a typical example, consider the German abstract artist and utopian Otto Freundlich's *Mein Himmel ist rot* (1933). I thank Elizabeth Boyle for this suggestion.
5. Here I intend for the word to be understood in its quasi-religious sense, as an object both remarkably valuable in itself, and representative of a cluster of crucial realities.
6. For a crisp theoretical account of colour in mimetic painting, see Lévi-Strauss (1964, 28).
7. Michel Pastoureau points out that the Tricolore's exact tints are not codified, so one would enjoy some artistic licence anyway (2016, 15).
8. *120 BPM* may already have had some imitators. In *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (Céline Sciamma, 2021), Marianne (Noémie Merlant) and Héloïse (Adèle Haenel) appear side by side, seated, in Tricolore-themed dresses in arresting static shots. Their names, of course, speak for themselves.
9. 'Pure blue remains pure blue if you place it next to grey . . .' (Fernand Léger, quoted in Verdet 1969, 14).
10. Here I borrow from Rick Altman's syntactic-semantic approach to film (556–58, 561–62).
11. Here I am thinking of a counterexample, the scenes shot in the Limelight disco from the classic AIDS drama *Parting Glances* (Bill Sherwood, 1986), in which a brief overhead shot of the dance floor momentarily distances the characters and their preoccupations from the action. The scene creates an affective break between intensely personal scenes of loss (the main plot) and nostalgic joy (a flashback to Douglas's pool in the Hamptons).

12. Everett says that colour, as an abstraction, can achieve the condition of music (2009, 355).
13. Unlike two other notable interludes, the school visit and the postering by the canal, this episode takes place entirely outside. There are arresting courtyard shots in the school period, but much of the action happens inside classrooms. With the postering, the action is within a culvert—so, neither necessarily indoors nor outdoors. One can however note the pale neutral tones of the school settings and the sinister yellow tones of the culvert, each set making their respective sequence stand out, visually and thematically, from the rest of the film.
14. I do not wish to imply that *120 BPM* would be a ‘multiethnic film’ simply because it showed some visible minority characters. None of these characters are major, nor does the film pass the DuVernay test (cf. Dargis 2016). Campillo himself is white. One might fairly describe *120 BPM* as a White film with inclusive aspects.
15. This tableau in particular recalls Angela and Émile from *Une femme est une femme*, in Émile’s flat. Unlike Godard, however, Campillo distributes his scheme across almost all of his characters.
16. In its rectangular shape, intense blue colour, and alarming character, the disco’s huge light recalls another warning object, from the *cinéma du look*: Gorodish’s weird tilting Perspex *objet* of blue water under clear oil, from *Diva* (1981, directed by Jean-Jacques Beineix). Closeups of it punctuate chase sequences. Both interventions of blue, in a particular shape and format, would therefore signal acceleration in the plot.
17. Gently downplaying the lovers’ story arc might also be a way for the film to finesse its stance on monogamy vs. promiscuity, as could the carefully-balanced dialogue in the culvert scene. Dion Kagan’s presentation of Larry Kramer’s sex-negative views, and Douglas Crimp’s analysis of the politics behind them, provoke questions for the film at the very least (see Kagan 2018, 214–15). I thank Chase Ledin for suggesting this aspect.
18. On a budget of US\$6.2 million (ca. €5.4 million), the total box office was US\$7.7 million, of which over US\$7 million came from France (boxofficemojo).
19. For a comparative film iconography of Parisian bridges, see for example Keith (Reader 1993), 414.
20. Langhorne’s characterization here applies specifically to another work, *Autumn Rhythm: Number 32*, from 1950. Here I chose to cite *Alchemy* instead because, while similar to *Number 32*, *Alchemy*’s wider palette and more delicate forms bring it to resemble the crowd tableau in the film more closely. However, the two paintings are recognizably of a phase and type.
21. On this figure’s history in a specifically French context, see (Hartford 2018), 4, 38–57 *passim*.
22. If we imagine the AIDS crisis as a fire, consider the activists as ‘des suppliciés que l’on brûle et qui font des signes sur leurs bûchers’ (Artaud 1937, 18).
23. In *Beau Travail* Lavant rolls spasmodically offstage.
24. Examples are plentiful. Hervé Guibert’s *À l’ami qui ne m’a pas sauvé la vie* (1990) and Vincent Borel’s *Un ruban noir* (1995) are two such cases in fiction.

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*37°2 le matin* [*Betty Blue*], directed by Jean-Jacques Beineix. 1986. performance by Béatrice Dalle, Jean-Hugues Anglade. 185 minutes. France.

*Trois Couleurs: bleu*, directed by Krzysztof Kieślowski. 1993. performance by Juliette Binoche. 98 minutes. France/Poland.

*Zero Patience*, directed by John Greyson. 1993. performance by John Robinson, Normand Fauteux, Dianne Hetherington. 97 minutes. Canada.